

Prussianized Germany

Americans of Foreign Descent and America's Cause

*From an address before the
Harrisburg, Pa., Chamber of Commerce
September 26, 1917*

By

OTTO H. KAHN





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I SPEAK as one who has seen the spirit of the Prussian governing class at work from close by, having at its disposal and using to the full practically every agency for moulding the public mind.

I have watched it proceed with relentless persistency and pro-

found cunning to instill into the nation the demoniacal obsession of power-worship and world-dominion, to modify and pervert the mentality—indeed the very fibre and moral substance—of the German people, a people which until misled, corrupted and systematically poisoned by the Prussian ruling caste, was and deserved to be an honored, valued and welcome member of the family of nations.

I have hated and loathed that spirit ever since it came within my ken many years ago; hated it all

the more as I saw it ruthlessly pulling down a thing which was dear to me—the old Germany to which I was linked by ties of blood, by fond memories and cherished sentiments.

The difference in the degree of guilt as between the German people and their Prussian or Prussianized rulers and leaders for the monstrous crime of this war and the atrocious barbarism of its conduct is the difference between the man who, acting under the influence of a poisonous drug, runs amuck in mad frenzy and the

unspeakable malefactor who administered that drug, well knowing and fully intending the ghastly consequences which were bound to follow.

THE world fervently longs for peace. But there can be no peace answering to the true meaning of the word—no peace permitting the nations of the earth, great and small, to walk unarmed and unafraid—until the teaching and the leadership of the apostles of an outlaw creed shall have become discredited and hateful in the sight of the German people; until that people shall have awakened to a consciousness of

the unfathomable guilt of those whom they have followed into calamity and shame; until a mood of penitence and of a decent respect for the opinions of mankind shall have supplanted the sway of what President Wilson has so trenchantly termed "truculence and treachery."

God strengthen the conscience and the understanding, the will and the power of the German people so that they may find the only road which will give to the world an early peace and in time lead Germany back into the family of

nations from which it is now an outcast.

From each successive visit to Germany for twenty-five years I came away more appalled by the sinister transmutation Prussianism had wrought amongst the people and by the portentous menace I recognized in it for the entire world.

It had given to Germany unparalleled prosperity, beneficent and advanced social legislation, and not a few other things of value, but it had taken in payment the soul of the race. It had made a "devil's bargain."

AND when this war broke out in Europe I knew that the issue had been joined between the powers of brutal might and insensate ambition on the one side and the forces of humanity and liberty on the other; between darkness and light.

Many there were at that time—and amongst them men for whose character I had high respect and whose motives were beyond any possible suspicion—who saw their

own and America's duty in strict neutrality, mentally and actually, but personally I believed from the beginning of the war, whether we liked all the elements of the Allies combination or not—and I certainly did not like the Russia of the Czars—that the cause of the Allies was America's cause.

I believed that this was no ordinary war between peoples for a question of national interest, or even national honor, but a conflict between fundamental principles and ideas; and so believing I was bound to feel that the

natural lines of race, blood and kinship could not be the determining lines for one's attitude and alignment, but that each man, regardless of his origin, had to decide according to his judgment and conscience on which side was the right and on which was the wrong and take his stand accordingly, whatever the wrench and anguish of the decision. And thus I took my stand three years ago.

BUT whatever one's views and feelings, whatever the country of one's birth or kin, only one course was left for all those claiming the privilege of American citizenship when after infinite forbearance the President decided that our honor and safety demanded that we take up arms against the Imperial German Government, and by action of Congress the cause and the fight against that Government were declared our cause and our fight.

The duty of loyal allegiance and faithful service to his country, even unto death, rests, of course, upon every American. But, if it be possible to speak of a comparative degree concerning what is the highest as it is the most elementary attribute of citizenship, that duty may almost be said to rest with an even more solemn and compelling obligation upon Americans of foreign origin than upon native Americans.

For we Americans of foreign antecedents are here not by the accidental right of birth, but by

our own free choice for better or for worse.

We are your fellow citizens because you accepted our oath of allegiance as given in good faith, and because you have opened to us in generous trust the portals of American opportunity and freedom, and have admitted us to membership in the family of Americans, giving us equal rights in the great inheritance which has been created by the blood and the toil of your ancestors, asking nothing from us in return but decent citizenship and adherence to those

ideals and principles which are symbolized by the glorious flag of America.

Woe to the foreign-born American who betrays the splendid trust which you have reposed in him!

Woe to him who considers his American citizenship merely as a convenient garment to be worn in fair weather but to be exchanged for another one in time of storm and stress!

Woe to the German-American, so-called, who, in this sacred war for a cause as high as any for which ever people took up arms, does

not feel a solemn urge, does not show an eager determination to be in the very fore-front of the struggle; does not prove a patriotic jealousy, in thought, in action and in speech to rival and to outdo his native-born fellow citizen in devotion and in willing sacrifice for the country of his choice and adoption and sworn allegiance, and of their common affection and pride.

AS Washington led Americans of British blood to fight against Great Britain, as Lincoln called upon Americans of the North to fight their very brothers of the South, so Americans of German descent are now summoned to join in our country's righteous struggle against a people of their own blood, which, under the evil spell of a dreadful obsession, and, Heaven knows, through no fault of ours, has made

itself the enemy of this peace-loving Nation, as it is the enemy of peace and right and freedom throughout the world.

To gain America's independence, to defeat oppression and tyranny, was indeed to gain a great cause.

To preserve the Union, to eradicate slavery, was perhaps a greater still.

To defend the very foundations of liberty and humanity, the very groundwork of fair dealing between nations, the very basis of peaceable living together among the peoples of the earth against

the fierce and brutal onslaught of ruthless, lawless, faithless might; to spend the lives and the fortunes of this generation so that our descendants may be freed from the dreadful calamity of war and the fear of war, so that the energies and billions of treasure now devoted to plans and instruments of destruction may be given henceforth to fruitful works of peace and progress and to the betterment of the conditions of the people—that is the highest cause for which any people ever unsheathed its sword.

He who shirks the full measure of his duty and allegiance in that noblest of causes, be he German-American, Irish-American, or any other hyphenated American, be he I. W. W. or Socialist or whatever the appellation, does not deserve to stand amongst Americans or, indeed, amongst free men anywhere.

He who, secretly or overtly, tries to thwart the declared will and aim of the Nation in this holy war is a traitor, and a traitor's fate should be his.

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